

# POLICY BRIEF

**RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR THE NEW  
ADMINISTRATION**

## Preparing for Future Chinese Leadership Changes: A Diplomatic Full-Court Press

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Unbeknownst to Americans voting in November, the future direction of U.S.–China relations may very likely have been set at the annual plenary session of the Communist Party Central Committee in Beijing just weeks before. Party chief Xi Jinping may decide to dial back his anti-corruption campaign that has expelled hundreds of thousands of cadres, step up political reforms designed to solidify rule of law and strengthen a more independent judiciary, and shift his attention to restructuring China's export economy in the face of growing competition from overseas. Or, he may decide to continue the costly purges, centralize more leadership organs, and whip up nationalistic support for his government by picking territorial fights.

Only those in Xi's inner circle know which direction he will take China, but either way he must start to choose a new leadership team at the October plenary session. Five of the seven Politburo Standing Committee members will be too old to serve beyond the new 19th Party Congress in fall 2017. Under current party constitution rules, Xi himself must retire by the 20th Party Congress in 2022, and so in October in Beijing he must gradually begin to show his hand: will he reveal the next generation of leaders who will replace him in six years or will he change the party constitution to stay in power beyond 2022?

President Trump's administration will have to carefully watch the October party meetings to know the correct strategy for dealing with China in the first few years.

Should we be patient with a retiring Xi and court his hand-picked successors in the Politburo, or should we turn a cold shoulder to a Xi "turning Putin" and break out the Cold War playbook, preparing for increased conflict between the U.S. and China? No matter Xi's plans, the next administration must strengthen and restructure interactions between senior American officials and identified future successors to Xi Jinping and his senior leaders in order to prepare for uncertainty and potential instability in relations.

Accordingly, we make the following proposals for a diplomatic full-court press that will increase and strengthen the number of "contact points" between the Trump administration and the future leadership of China:

### Proposal 1

Continue the biannual U.S.–China Strategic and Economic Dialogues (S&ED), but try to strengthen them, yet increase the number of direct meetings between the U.S. president and the CCP general secretary. The U.S. must make sure that China continues to bring to its side of the table senior leaders responsible for strategic/foreign policy and economic/financial policy. State Councillor Yang Jiechi, former foreign minister and former ambassador to the U.S., and longtime steward of U.S.–China relations within their bureaucracy, is required to retire in 2018. The new U.S. president should press Xi Jinping to make sure the future head of the strategic track of negotiations is as familiar



**The new U.S. president must strengthen and restructure interactions between senior U.S. officials and identified future successors to China's President Xi Jinping and his senior leaders in order to prepare for uncertainty and potential instability in relations.**

**This policy brief is part of a series of recommendations from the Baker Institute for the incoming president's administration.**

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with U.S. officials at many levels as Yang. Given the uncertainty in Chinese future leadership, the goal of the U.S. president should be to bring in to the S&ED as many members of the CCP Politburo as possible, as often as possible. China has a history of trying to fob off lower-ranking ministers who are not Politburo members as hosts for visiting American senior Cabinet secretaries. U.S. presidents have rarely done so, but they should consider upgrading the S&ED by sending the vice president to the meetings in order to induce more Chinese Politburo members to participate. On a related note, if Xi Jinping begins to identify a successor at the Party Congress in 2017, the American president should press Xi to include the successor in future S&EDs, and encourage both to visit the United States as often as possible. The U.S. president may consider inviting the American vice president, or even a bipartisan team of former U.S. presidents—George W. Bush and Barack Obama have 16 years experience negotiating with Chinese officials—to serve as “strategic hosts” to any possible successor to Xi, affording a future Chinese leader a unique symbolic honor as they escort him/her around the U.S. and introduce him/her to U.S. leaders and policymakers.

## Proposal 2

President Trump should consider enhancing and “deformalizing” the U.S.–China Consultation on People-to-People Exchanges by proposing to Xi Jinping that it be hosted by distinguished former American statesmen instead of only the U.S. secretary of state and the Politburo member responsible for cultural affairs. The consultation seemingly addresses nonstrategic and noneconomic interactions—culture, education, science and technology, women’s issues, health, and sports—but actually it sets the freedom of interaction of a powerful American civil society and the potentially powerful and yet nascent Chinese civil society. Chinese officials at all levels admire and respect the way American civil society works with the U.S. government on critical public issues, and thus they welcome U.S. and

international NGOs to work with Chinese NGOs, even though they fear American intelligence officials are using them to subvert Communist Party rule.

China’s recent adoption of parts of Russia’s draconian foreign NGO registration law threatens the stable interaction of American and Chinese civil societies, and thus the role of corporations, universities, research institutions, and nonprofits in solving shared problems in global health, global warming, and even space exploration. The new U.S. president should consider charging retired statesmen—people who have a reputation for excellence and leadership—with the hosting of mutually respectful and beneficial people-to-people exchanges. Perhaps Presidents Bush and Obama could be invited to take up this critical task, since both created valuable exchanges with China in energy, science, and education that they should wish to preserve. President Trump could use the credibility such senior statesmen could impart. Former U.S. presidents, with their ability to attract comprehensive media coverage and their access to Nobel laureates, Olympic and professional athletes, movie stars, public intellectuals, and corporate and NGO leaders alike, are a tool uniquely available to current American presidents. Xi Jinping cannot call on his former rivals in the CCP to help him in this way.